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Profile

Joseph Sung: marking the tenth anniversary of SARS

The timing is uncanny. As WHO closely monitors the emergence of a new deadly coronavirus, it is almost 10 years to the day on March 12, 2003, that the agency issued its first global health alert in more than a decade in an effort to combat the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Most of the thousands who became infected and the almost 800 people who died from SARS during the outbreak were from China, Hong Kong, and southeast Asia, and the legacy of that trauma is still very much in evidence today. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) will be one of many institutions to mark the tenth anniversary of the SARS crisis, and the University's Vice-Chancellor and President Joseph Sung spoke to *The Lancet* about the effect that it had on him, his family, and his city.

Sung graduated in medicine from the University of Hong Kong in 1983, and after a PhD at the University of Calgary in Canada he returned to Hong Kong and made his name throughout the 1990s as part of the group that pioneered the antimicrobial and endoscopic treatment of peptic ulcers and gastrointestinal bleeding. Having risen through the departmental ranks, by 2003 Sung was Chairman of the Department of Medicine and Therapeutics at CUHK's Prince of Wales Hospital when what he calls "the calamity" struck. It began with the arrival in Hong Kong of an infected physician from the city of Guangzhou, on the Chinese mainland. After 16 of his fellow hotel guests became ill, one sought treatment at the Prince of Wales Hospital, and in just 2 weeks there had been 138 new infections in the hospital, including many among hospital staff. "It was a moment of truth for all of us", says Sung.

A gastroenterologist by training, Sung had to orchestrate the hospital's response to an unknown pathogen that seemed to be spreading unchecked through the city. "We had thousands of people coming down with the illness and 25% were health-care workers, so every day I was not just looking after patients but a lot of colleagues who became patients", he recalls. "It was a very shocking moment, a very emotional time as well, because we knew nothing about the disease, and people deteriorated so quickly that they were almost dead within a week or so. Families were in tears and worrying about their loved ones, but they were not allowed to see them. We tried everything but we didn't see much improvement. So that was a very scary moment."

The city was thrown into paralysis. International travel ground to a halt, usually packed hotels and restaurants stood deserted, and schools stayed shut as communal outbreaks led to tens of thousands of people being evacuated from their homes. "There were no traffic jams, that was the only good thing", notes Sung with wry gallows humour. But there is a raw, emotional edge to

his words when he recalls what he, his colleagues, and his patients went through. More than anything, he says, it was the solidarity shown by his fellow professionals that helped them get through the ordeal. "Everybody just forgot about their background, whether they were cardiologists or neurologists, orthopaedic surgeons, or ophthalmologists, we all became SARS doctors. Everybody stayed in hospital for 3 months without going home because we were scared to spread the disease to our families, and we simply did not have time to go home, so everyone stayed in hospital day and night. That was a long battle." Sung also drew great strength from his family, despite not being able to see them. "In those days there was no Facebook or Twitter, so they sent me photos through email and gave me phone calls as a support during the months I was away. But even after 3 months when I started to go home for dinner we kept a distance from each other...I'd stay in my parents' home and I moved my parents in to live with my family, so I was in isolation until the whole thing was over."

When the outbreak did eventually recede, Sung was feted as an Asian Hero by *Time Magazine* for his work. But he has mixed feelings about what happened when the crisis abated. "It's nothing to do with one person, it was all the health-care professionals in Hong Kong who worked together. So I think the honour should be given to everyone if there is such a need, but we appreciate the society's gesture and the government's compliments." And during the three inquiries into the handling of the outbreak, Sung feels that it was only staunch support from the public that prevented the hospital being made a scapegoat: "On the one hand, you are given all the jewels on the crown", he says, "and on the other hand, people put mud on your face".

One thing is for certain, says Sung, "life has never been the same since 2003". Even his increasing involvement in education owes a debt to his reflections on the crisis. "I truly believe that training good doctors and young people who are willing to serve the society and the country is very important. We do not need more people who only know how to make their own lives better and earn more money", he says. Francis Chan is now Dean of the Faculty of Medicine at CUHK, and counts Sung as his boss, his friend, and importantly, he says, his role model. And he sums up Sung's philosophy perfectly. "I remember Joseph often said to me, 'what will you leave to this world after you pass away? Will people remember how many papers you have published? Rather, your students will remember you. Your patients and their families will remember you for the rest of their lives.'" Hong Kong will certainly remember Sung.

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